

- Develop and update an “out the door” list of things to do when you get a notification
- Develop and update a PM (Preventive Maintenance) list for your vehicle and ready pack so that your vehicle stays ready to go & your ready pack always has fresh supplies and seasonally appropriate clothing
- “Dummy cord” (tether with light string to your pack or person) anything that’s likely to get lost – knives, compasses, GPS, etc. If parachute cord is too heavy, then consider using one of the strands from the parachute cord’s core
- Have an “A’ bag” or “war bag” to hold your 72-hour supplies. It stays in your auto. The “war bag” contains supplies for your stay in base camp as well as any replacement mission supplies for your ready pack. An ideal-sized bag is large enough to also hold your pack to protect it from abrasion, UV/sunlight, and the attention of thieves. Contents:
 - Stove/fuel
 - Extra batteries – headlight, radio, etc.
 - Extra food & bottled water – include non-perishable snacks for the pack as well as at least four meals (total of 3,000 calories/day) of non-perishable, little-or-no prep foods to eat in base camp. Don’t count on Logistics to have its feeding plan in place early in the incident. MREs are excellent
 - Toiletry/shaving kit w/ towel – a washcloth and a bottle of water or rubbing alcohol can be a refreshing clean-up after an assignment. You may want to shower and shave at longer incidents. Contact lens wearers - include contact lens fluid & carrying case
 - Spare compass and grid reader
 - Spare parts – fuel, replacement parts for stove; bulbs/LED units for lights; valves & patches for hydration bladder, etc.
 - Spare clothes & camp shoes – replacement items for pack + comfort items for around base camp. You may want to swap into a dry set of clothes between assignments in heavy rain. Never underestimate the value of clean, dry clothes to wear in camp while out of service, either
 - Spare first aid/improvisation supplies – band-aids, duct tape, cable ties, nitrile gloves, zip-lock bags, OTC meds, “super glue,” etc.
 - Spare writing notebook/pencils
 - Knife sharpening kit
 - Prescriptions
 - Sleeping bag + sleeping pad
 - Tent & ground cloth, or hammock
 - Small travel alarm clock – may need it for that “power nap” on the way home
 - Book, playing cards, or other base camp entertainment – these aren’t just diversions. They’re a valid tool for personal stress management
 - Cell phone backup battery or cell phone charger – “AA” battery-powered chargers work well
 - Zip-locking plastic bags in several sizes
 - Money – a small quantity of cash (both paper and coin) is invaluable in small stores in remote areas; stores in disaster areas may not have access to credit card electronic processing services
 - Operator’s manuals for your radio, GPS receiver, etc.
 - Wall chargers for your radio and your cell phone
- Keep a couple of cans of dog food in your “war bag” if you’re a dog handler or canine support person. A tired dog will eat moist food even if they’re too stressed to eat dry kibble. The moist food will also supplement the dog’s water intake. If you’re a field canine support person, *know what brand of dog food your handler’s dog will eat*
- When in base camp, avoid the use of anything from your ready pack. Obtain it from your “war bag” or from Logistics if at all possible
- Avoid loaning anything (unless it’s crew equipment) from your ready pack to anyone else except the subject. Your pack has enough for you but no one else. Anyone who has to borrow something may not be prepared in the first place to go to the field
- Include in your car a USB cable that’s compatible to your GPS receiver. Some GPS receivers have special sockets that won’t accept a standard USB cable to connect to a PC in the CP. Other CPs may forget to bring a USB cable
- Put your name (and ideally your phone number) on your personal equipment
- Tie a small piece of flagging tape, fabric ribbon or streamer to small objects that are easily lost on the forest floor (compass, grid readers, eyeglasses) – the streamers make them more visible
- Zip-locking craft bags (“crack baggies”) are much better than the zip-locked sandwich bags for organizing small items in your pack or war bag. They’re thicker and have stronger seals. The variety of sizes (from “crack” size up to 5x5”) keeps small things, such as batteries, OTC meds, etc., from wandering around in the bag. Small bags = less pack weight. Craft bags are available in craft stores, such as Hobby Lobby, as well as the craft sections of Walmart.
- Keep a handful of nitrile (not latex) gloves in one of the larger, zip-locked craft bags (“crack baggies”) with the air pressed out of the bag. Nitrile gloves last much longer than latex ones in storage, and they don’t trigger allergic reactions in sensitive subjects
- Avoid “protein bars” for field snacks – they require more water to metabolize than high-carbohydrate bars

- Headlights are prone to switching “on” in your pack. That exhausts the batteries. Follow the recommendations of your light’s manufacturer – either reverse the batteries in the battery compartment, or tape over part of the battery contacts, or simply remove the batteries from the light until they’re needed. Some lights should never have their batteries reversed
- Never take a new piece of equipment on a search until you have practiced with it and are certain that it works
- Pack so that you’re *functionally* comfortable – the carrying of too much “snivel gear” (unnecessary luxury equipment) expends energy that ought to be focused on searching. You want to be just comfortable enough to search effectively; carry anything less and you’re distracted by discomfort; carry anything more and you may be distracted by the extra weight
- Keep your uniform clothing ready for a call-out. Keep the shirt and pants on a single clothes hanger. Pre-thread your belt through the belt loops in your pants. Stuff a pair of boot socks (and liners if you use them) in the tops of your boots. *Keep all of these items in one place.* Firefighters in the station house keep their protective gear with the boots standing up, the socks hanging inside the boots, and the pants carefully folded down over the tops of the boots. For a quick suit-up this permits the firefighters to hop out of bed and instantly slide their feet and legs into the trousers and straight through into the socks and boots. Their lower bodies are literally dressed in seconds
- Keep your “pocket items” (notebook/pencil, gloves, glasses, knife, LED light, etc.) in a small zip-lock “pocket bag” in your “war bag” or your uniform pants pocket. Keep lightweight gloves and a balaclava (watch cap, “boggin,” “touque”) in a pocket of your jacket. They’ll be readily accessible when you arrive so you don’t have to rummage around in your pack
- Develop and practice a system for loading your pack so that certain items are in pre-determined locations (i.e., your jacket is always in the lid pocket, the first aid items are in the pack’s left outside pocket, etc.). A good idea is to have an index- or business card-sized inventory list in each pocket of your pack
- Keep a current state road atlas in your vehicle. Most searches are in remote areas off the beaten path. Don’t count on Mapquest, automobile GPS, etc. for accurate directions to backcountry locations. Delorme Gazetteers are excellent
- Either pre-program your radio with the local frequencies, or at least have a list of the frequencies laminated inside your pocket notebook or on your radio’s battery case
- Have a small LED “walking home” light for a backup light source. The coin-sized Photon MicroLights aren’t sufficient for search work, but they’re just bright enough to use to “walk home” (back to the CP or extraction point) if your primary & secondary SAR lights quit. Get the Photon light with the sliding “on/off” switch. You’ll wear out your thumb and forefinger if you try using the Photo MicroLight with the squeeze-on/release-off switch
- Minimize the number of “danglies” – items dangling from your pack, or strapped onto the outside of your pack. They tend to snag in heavy brush
- Take lessons from the “ultralight” backpacking practitioners. For example, substitute a silicone-coated, nylon ripstop tarp for the heavier plastic tarp that you might have in your pack. The ripstop tarp is stronger, lighter, and easier to put up and take down than a plastic one
- Wear some type of leather work gloves in the field. They’ll protect you not only from briars and brush, but from abrasions or lacerations from falling on rock or other sharp objects
- Never underestimate the value of a safety helmet off-trail at night or in icy weather, even if the terrain isn’t “technical” in nature. The chances of a nasty fall rise greatly at night. Don’t complicate matters by becoming another victim
- Safety glasses or goggles at night can save you from a painful smack across the eyes by briars or limbs
- Pencils – pencils work better than pens in the field. Graphite doesn’t run or bleed. Pencils don’t run out of ink. Sharpen both ends of the pencil – if one end breaks or goes dull, flip the pencil around and use the opposite end. Pencils are usually smaller and lighter, too. A big box of golf pencils will go a long way
- Notebooks – use a good quality one. Better yet, use one with waterproof paper. Cheap paper can dissolve when wet
- Take a GPS fix when you arrive at base camp and before leaving the drop-off point in the field. More than one shuttle driver has gotten lost, or left a crew at the wrong insertion point
- Always do a “360-check” after stopping in the field. Turn completely around while carefully looking for any dropped gear before you move on
- NOAA weather radio – keep one switched on at home. Your first notification of a local disaster may be an alert on the NOAA radio. Along that vein, be certain that your family is prepared in your absence for a disaster. At least one SAR operator has left home to respond to a local tornado disaster only to find out that a second tornado passed through and struck his home while he was gone. A good emergency kit and a well-understood emergency plan can make your family feel much safer while you’re away
- Employment – avoid misunderstandings. Make an agreement with your employer about your SAR volunteering – how often you’ll be gone; how long you’ll be gone, etc., unless you’d like to seek new employment after an incident